

L.B.J INTERVIEW -TRAGEDY AND TRAINSTION

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From May 2nd, 1970 CBS NEWS Walter Cronkite interviews President Lyndon Johnson on the day he became President.

[00:00:00 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM)

mr president on that tragic day in dallas when you heard that jack kennedy was dead did it strike you right then i'm president of the united states i think the first thought i had was that this is a terrifying thing that may have international consequences to this might be an international conspiracy of some kind and i knew of course that i was on my own and it was my responsibility and it was a thing that had to be dealt with quickly and calmly as you could be and as correct and competent as you could be and i tried to think it out and recognize the problems that face me and the necessity of giving the nation and the world confidence as soon as i could we all know your great strength of character mr president but it seems almost inconceivable that a man could deal so calmly with the with these decisions that had to be made with all these thoughts pouring through your head in the moment of such emotional uh what would normally be turmoil did you did you kind of recognize the strength in yourself no but there have been some that observed my behavior through the years that have felt that if i was going to blow it

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have felt that if i was going to blow it it would always be on a matter of little importance and there was no question in my mind that this would require everything i had and perhaps more in this broadcast former president lyndon baines johnson presents his account of the assassination of president kennedy and its aftermath this account and the two earlier broadcasts were edited by cbs news from 13 hours of conversations with cbs news correspondent walter cronkite the conversations were filmed last autumn at the lbj ranch in texas certain material has been deleted from this broadcast at president johnson's request made on the ground of national security this broadcast is sponsored by mr president what was your personal relationship with president kennedy we were not like brothers we were not constant companions i don't recall that we ever had an element of bitterness or uh deep feeling enter into any of our discussions he and i served as members of the house together the house of representatives were friendly cordial but not personally intimate he and i served as members of the senate together for several years

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several years during the three years that he was president he included me in the official meetings of importance i believe in the cuban missile crisis they had 37 of 38 meetings of the executive committee of 7-8 that met on that crisis and i was there 35 times so i look over that period from the 40s late 40s to the early 60s it lasted almost two decades i don't think of any even the tenseness of the campaign that we even the periods when we were aligned on different sides of a question which was very rare that i ever saw any indication of anything but friendship and respect what was the situation as you built up toward this texas trip on your position on the ticket did you have any assurances yet that you were going to be on the ticket again in 64. if uh you're asking did i seek assurances the answer is no if you're asking did i believe i had assurances i answered a positive yes i never distrusted president kennedy uh maybe one of my weaknesses i i distrust very few people but uh i never had any occasion distrust him he never indicated anything to me in

his life that he didn't carry out to the letter and in his next to the last press conference he was asked the question do you want lyndon johnson on the ticket and do you think he'll be on the ticket he said the answer is yes to both of those questions i don't

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yes to both of those questions i don't know how anyone could speculate in the light of that clear definite question he expressed to me his doubts about our popularity he was very concerned about the situation political situation prevailing in the country no movement of our legislative program no accomplishments or achievements of any importance i don't think that's a fair statement i'd say uh a majority of the things that he wished to enact had not been enacted the test ban treaty was a great accomplishment and but the things that he wanted like civil rights had been bogged down and it caused him great loss of support not only in the south but other parts of the country uh his elementary education bill his medical care bill his conservation measures so his poll in texas showed that only 38 of the people approved what he was doing as president and this poll pointed out that if we had were to have any chance whatever in the 64 campaign against goldwater we had to have the state machinery and the popularity of the state administration and the leadership of the state governor john conley because the governor is a powerful leader in this state and i think president kennedy wanted to go to the people direct himself and show them that he was entitled to their support and a vote of confidence and he also wanted to have the machinery of this state back of it in the form of the governor and the polls so stated

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and the polls so stated mr president did you have any concern about the president's safety here yes why i have concern about president's safety anywhere anytime but so many of our friends were concerned uh we got letters on it there were very ugly things being said we've had a terrifying and mortifying experience in dallas in 1960 led by some public officials encouraged by some of the leaders of the community and they knocked ms johnson's hat off and they spit on us they had very ugly signs and ambassador stevenson went there later and had the same experience did president kennedy ever express any concerns about dallas to you yes he talked to me about his experiences uh with a group of newspaper editors where the dallas editor was present and gave him quite a lecture and he was not unfamiliar with the situation in dallas or the situation in texas or the situation in the nation and he discussed this with us and he just he felt by going there personally and listing these places that he could generate to support and change the situation and i think he did he would have i think he was well received in san antonio they stood out in the rain heard him in fort worth and not anything that can be as helpful to a candidate and to have a good audience response from the kind of

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good audience response from the kind of people that you think in your judgment a lecture and a lot of folks that sit in mahogany panel offices that forget to go vote but most of the people out there in that parking lot that morning had their candidate and it was pretty apparent to president and to me that it was jack kennedy last words president kennedy said to me in the presence of my baby sister in fort worth following his appearance at the parking lot and at the breakfast that morning and it came to it was about as near bragging as i ever heard him he was enthused by the crowd that stood in the rain and met him there at seven eight o'clock in the morning he asked me to come up to his room and i told him my sister that i want him to meet her my sister ms lucia alexander lived in fort worth at that time and she's now moved to memphis but uh i wanted her she was a favorite in my family and so he said we'll come right onto the room i'm gonna change my shirt before i go out to the plane and he said to me with my sister standing there you can be sure one thing we're going to carry two states next year massachusetts and texas we're going to carry at least two states and i said we're going to carry a lot more than those two and that ended the conversation he told my

sister goodbye glad he met her and we went down and went to our plane and he went to his mr president now we get to the fateful moments of that tragic day in dallas would you like to describe for us what you saw what you felt

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what you saw what you felt during that motorcade we left fort worth ahead of the president's air force one we landed in dallas around 11 30. we mr johnson and i got off the plane and shook hands it was a group that were there to receive the president and we moved back with the dignitaries welcomed the president and ms kennedy as they came off the plane he was happy and smiling and i think stimulated as i've said by the footwork experience that morning and by the previous day's experiences and ms kennedy was radiant and looked charming and beautiful in that pink hat and pink suit they got in a big lincoln with governor connolly because the president rides with the first man of the state when the first man of the nation comes to visit they got in the big lincoln and drove away ms johnson cindy yarber and i got in the car that was driven by patrolmen and rufus youngbud was our secret service escort as we continued to drive once we heard some sound some thought it was a firecracker some thought it was a gun some thought was a muffler on a car backfiring or something to very shortly after the sound the first sound just almost instantaneously very competent cautious secret service man jumped over the front seat and shoved me to the bottom of the lincoln he told ms johnson and senator yarber to lean over as far as they could so they could get their head below the back seat he got on top of me and he put his body between me and the crowd this was ruthless young and he had doing his his knees in my back and his elbows in my back and a good 200 pounds all over me and the car was speeding up and he had a microphone from the front seat that he pulled over with him as he came

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that he pulled over with him as he came over a two-way radio talking and there's a lot of traffic on the radio and you could hear them talking back and forth and one of them said let's get out of here quick mr president the precise number of shots has been a matter of considerable controversy how many do you remember hearing i'm really not sure walter i think i heard the first shot i know mr youngblood acted almost simultaneously i heard reports about shots and exchanges about firecrackers or what might be mufflers but i i couldn't be sure i know that i heard the first one and perhaps uh heard the others unless his body covering me kept the sound from coming in there uh it may have muffled it but i'm just not sure do you recall at all your first premonition of a major tragedy involved in this thing yes i think that when they said let's get out of here and the next thing we're on the way the hospital just almost shoved us into the hospital and to room the first room it could come to down to carter he pulled all the shades in the room closed it and we sat there endure the agony and wait to for the reports that came in from time to time and when did you first know that it was president kennedy who had been hit i guess after we got in the room and uh people started coming in with reports that had been outside and who had seen

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that had been outside and who had seen them go in and then president kennedy's staff and secret service agents were giving us constant reports who i suggested that maybe we ought to try to go up there and agents just emphatic no and i suggested that maybe mrs johnson then could go and uh they agreed that she could and a member of congress congressman brooks was there and he escorted her and kind of protected her from the crowds along with the agents and they took her up and she saw ms kennedy talked to her and saw miss conley and talked to her and uh we were just agonizing and hoping against hope that it was not a very not serious uh down the road until uh they faithful word came when you first were told that it was the president who had been shot did they thereafter sort of break it to you easily or did they right away tell you how serious it appeared to be i think that they told me the president had been shot and that governor conley had been shot and that they were going to the operating room with governor connolly and that the president

was gone was gone the very first first conversation you had then the first you knew about it was no i don't know uh that we had reports that they had to move that they're taking the president in and the president was wounded but i mean the the

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was wounded but i mean the the no one discussed the gory details or how the president been hit or anything of that type the the greatest shock that i can recall was one of the men saying he's gone and it was who brought that word to you kenneth o'donnell was there any sort of on your part the momentary panic of all of this great load of responsibility being placed on your shoulder so suddenly did you never had any responsibility like that but i've not been free of problems or troubles all my life and responsibilities and i was my knowledge of history uh i knew what had confronted the vice presidents before did you have any feeling that you wanted to be alone a moment just to gather your thoughts what was your first decision after hearing this news to ask that the announcement to be made after we had left the room and in an unmarked car and were enroute to the presidential plane so that if it were an international conspiracy and they were out to destroy our form of government and the leaders in that government that we would minimize the opportunity for doing so johnson's account of the assassination in dallas will continue in a moment

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we continue now with lbj and cbs news correspondent walter cronkite mr president who made the decision that you should come back in the president's plane air force one rather than air force two which you had had throughout the trip up to then i guess i did ultimately it was suggested that we go to the plane and that we go there as quickly as we could and we go to washington as quickly as we could and i won't recount all the details but i raised various problems and questions to those things and we thought them out and exchanged views and uh i was of the opinion that everyone felt that what we did was the thing to do and i never heard any question about it for many months i mean i mean the questions about whether the president should ride in the president's plane came along for a good many months later kind of after thought nobody raised the question there in dallas does not accept that it should be done when i got to the plane i called the president's brother the attorney general bobby kennedy and asked his advice and judgment on where the ill should be taken under what circumstances and who should administer it and so forth and discussed it with him and he gave me his immediate reaction but said that he would check into it and

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said that he would check into it and call me back what was his immediate reaction on this but the world should be taken in dallas at once uh i said well i don't have the oath and uh he said well i'll have it given to you right away and a very business-like although i guess he must have been suffering more than almost anyone except ms kennedy he told me what he'd do and he did it and momentarily general katzenbach called me and read the oath to my secretary miss marie famer and she took the oath in shorthand and ms kennedy arrived we had decided and notified him that the plane would not take off until miss kennedy arrived with the president's body i wasn't going to leave without her when she got there we had word that we'd made the arrangements for justice judge hughes and we were in the plane about 15 minutes less before judge hughes arrived we took the oath and we were off what uh what is the urgency about taking an oath that once does it really matter that much well i assume until you do the the oath is symbolic and it means i think that you are the president in the public mind and in the minds of the people of the world and as you know there have been a good many speculations about my heart attack and my physical ability and things of that kind and i guess that put most of them to rest that i had physically moved from the hospital

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i had physically moved from the hospital to the plane that i had taken the oath that i was the president and i think most important order that the country had a man in charge and a man in a position to act and make decisions and uh it's good for everybody to know that here and abroad that we're not rudderless that we do

have a the person that the constitution provides shall succeed to the presidency and he has already succeeded and he is in a position to transact business and take whatever actions he needs to take to protect the republic were you startled at the appearance of mrs kennedy when she came to the plane well you use the word startled it was a a tragic thing to observe here with this delicate beautiful lady always eloquent elegant always fastidious always the passion plate and i remember her getting off the plane in dallas a few hours before and contrasting that with how she looked then and how she looked when she got back on the plane after that trip through the streets of dallas in the hospital and there she was and what that morning was a beautiful unsoiled nicely pressed pink garment that was the last word in fashion and style and looks and that she got off the plane wearing and

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that she got off the plane wearing and she still had the same garment on but it was streaked and caked and soiled throughout with her husband's blood and ms johnson asked her if she wouldn't come in and let her help change the clothes she said no maybe a little later she would ask mary if she wanted to do anything about it who was mary mary gallagher her assistant when air force one landed at andrews air force base the first man aboard was robert kennedy and reports that afterwards said that he brushed past you without a word to go to the back of the plane where mrs kennedy the body were did you did that happen and did you feel any offense at that moment i don't recall that i don't know i would not have felt any offense in a critical period like that and carrying the burden troubles that he was carrying i would have thought the natural thing to do was go as quickly as you could to the wooda and ms kennedy and to try to console her and give her strength and i'm sure that's what he did and i would have found nothing improper in it i worked with senator kennedy as attorney general for uh several months after that and there was no brushing by back and forth was the was the arrangement that had been made in washington for the removal of president kennedy's body a surprise to you yeah you had envisioned a little different arrangement in washington i gathered well i don't know that i had thought out all of the logistics of the

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all of the logistics of the leaving the plane but it didn't occur to me that the ramp would be removed and we would not be privileged to go down the same ramp with the body is giving you i don't know why that arrangement was made no did you ever inquire no consider it a family matter no i just uh i just observed it and as i did did many things and we had plenty of problems those days that were ahead and this one was something that's behind us mr president can't help but ask putting this on the record questions related to published reports of the trip back from dallas the decision to fly in air force one the decision to take over the president's quarters on the plane the relationship between you and the president's staff on the plane was there any feeling of of animosity at that point not that i was aware of until several months later because the president's staff people worked as my trusted confidants on my front door and back door and they were there serving me and serving the country and mrs kennedy and i were in frequent communication during all those early days as we have been throughout the years at least during the

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at least during the certainly during the early days of my presidency and i have seen heard those reports and i think there must have been a calculated effort on somebody's part i don't know who to try to make it appear that i didn't get along with the president's staff although i employed them and asked them to continue to serve me and they did and one of them went in the cabinet and all of those left left of their own choice several months later i know that uh there was there were stories about the mrs kennedy feeling uh luke for me but miss kennedy talked to me and expressed herself to me a number of times and for the stories to have any merit at all it would have to be a lot of hypocrisy involved and i i know that that's not that term should never be associated with jacqueline kennedy now we come to the difficult decision you had about the delicate decision of moving into the white house itself you'd like to recount your thoughts about that and the

problems connected with it well the physical location of my activity was not a matter of concern to me the thing that concerned me and those around me very much was trying to give the world a picture of stability and to give them a confidence that would be worthy of their recognition and their support and to do that

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and to do that we had to have the assistance of uh some other people in other countries and here at homes for instance i thought it quite important that i have the cooperation the assistance of the former president of president hoover president truman president eisenhower i not only had their assistance in cooperation i had their enthusiastic help president eisenhower got in his car and drove down from gettysburg and sat in my office borrowed a yellow note pad and a pencil and sat there for a good while and wrote out his views his suggestions to a new president he said the first man i'd call to washington's robert anderson he asked him to come down here and counsel with you on the tax bill and on some of these other things i asked him to come in the next day and he did he said second thing i do i'd work out a reign with the leadership have a joint session of the congress and i would present my views to the country and at that time i would say that we're going to have no special favorites business or farmers or labor they're all going to be treated fairly and they have neither no fear of this president he said the next thing i do is say the congress we want to take up president kennedy's program start with his tax program and he very wisely made some recommendations to congress let's get them acted on and so with that memorandum as a basis with some of the suggestions i received from president truman and with the leadership meeting i tried to pull in all these groups and i thought that it was a rather formidable bulldozer by the time we got them in and got them in agreement to move forward and we started moving forward and legislation started moving the tax bill started

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started moving the tax bill started moving the civil rights bill started moving and we enacted practically all of president kennedy's program and uh while it didn't go as far in some instances i wanted to go on my program enacted practically all the johnson program mr president did the emergency created by the assassination teach us anything we didn't already know about the problems in the transition of power no i don't think of anything i was present the evening in mr rayburn's office less than five minutes after vice president truman left there to assume the presidency and i've studied that transition i was there during it i watched it but i don't know how i could improve on it to i took everything i learned from it and i i didn't follow it in some respects i kept all of my cabinet he got rid of most of his i said to all the staff in the white house i'd like you to stay in continuous throughout this administration i said to all the cabinet i want you to stay in just as you serve president kennedy serve me because after all it's not something you serve in one individual you're serving the country this is your country and you're peculiarly equipped by your experience and his trust and then i constantly had the picture in front of me that uh president kennedy had selected me as the his executor his trustee to stand in for him he couldn't be there he'd selected these men how would i feel if i'd selected a group of men and left them to entrust with certain responsibilities and the first thing my successor did came in and

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thing my successor did came in and started laminating them and firing them and so forth and i didn't think that would leave a good impression with the country so i endured some handicaps and i suffered some heartaches and some disappointments because of my desire to try to present a united front and let nothing that i did create an excuse for division what were the handicaps the heartaches the disappointments well the differences in viewpoints and the very fact that some of the people who served were did not share the either the desire or the hopes that i had for the country and for the government and that they in effect undermined the administration and board from within to create problems for us leaked information was slanted and things of that nature and a good many of them resigned at certain periods and left the impression that the government was not in keeping with their views and so forth mr president these people who resigned who disappointed you brought you heartaches was there a pattern in their behavior and in their departure was

there a leadership to the group was it a cult was it a click and did it have a political objective was it led by bobby kennedy i can't answer that question honestly and directly i don't know i don't believe that all of those left left because someone directed them to or urged them to i think they were grief

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or urged them to i think they were grief stricken i think that they no longer felt that they could uh be up to what was required of them that their relationship with the president was a special relationship that they couldn't transfer to some new person and they went on to other fields uh some of the people who resigned or who left the white house and went to other places in the government are among the people that i admire most for what they did for their country ted soresen who i believe to be the president's principal a personal counselor i thought certainly the ablest person and his presenter and then perhaps the most devoted and dedicated to the what was best for this country he served me faithfully but only a short period of time i hated him seeing him leave i think he honestly conscientiously left on his own accord without any direction from anyone else because he just felt that he uh the white house would never be the same relationship is gone it's just like a fellow when he loses one of his loved ones sometimes wants to move and go to another part of the country and start over again of course the events in dallas cast a shadow over the entire nation but did you have a feeling that it cast a shadow over that year you served before your own election to the office did you feel you were operating under the handicap of a shadow yes i had many problems in my conduct of the office being contrasted with

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president kennedy's conduct the office with my manner of dealing with things in his manner with my accent and his accent with my background and his background and he was a great public hero and anything that i did that someone didn't approve of they would always feel that president kennedy wouldn't have done that that he would have done it a different way that he wouldn't have made that mistake and uh when i uh i had some minor bay of pigs or missile crisis or uh difficulties as he had with khrushchev and vann at vienna and came back and added many billions to the defense budget and recommended to us in the congress that we call up the reserves which we did to get ready for a crisis it really didn't develop but when i had those things happen to me they there was a group in the country and very important influential motors of opinion who i think genuinely felt that if president kennedy been there those things wouldn't have happened to him and i hope it wouldn't have and maybe it wouldn't have but because but it was a problem president johnson's account will continue in a moment we continue now with lbj and cbs news correspondent walter cronkite mr president uh

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walter cronkite mr president uh what made you realize in those early days that the doubts alarms fears of the population stemming from the incidents in dallas were actually growing that a an inquiry had to be held rather than trusting this to the normal routine of justice to the fbi i think that everyone trusted the fbi report but it was very evident that they're going to be a number of inquiries the state of texas was going to have an inquiry it would have been pathetic to have a thing like this occur in the state and i won't be interested enough to find out all the details about it so the state had a responsibility of course the fbi was already going everything it could several committee chairmen had announced there's going to be an inquiry so all during this period i'd say the first week was when the decision was made that there had to be a judicious inquiry made by reputable people that would be respected and that they had to have the the power and the subpoena and the finances to do what they needed to do the question then was who was to do it how was it to be organized and i believe i'd be fair in saying that i don't believe a single man wanted to serve on that commission i don't believe there's a single man that would have sought that as an activity or an assignment all of them because of their position already had overburdened work to do and had assignments that that they needed to give their attentions to the chief justice sent me a word that he had seen some speculation and he came in and the net of what he

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and he came in and the net of what he said was that he had concluded that it was unwise and unfair to ask the chief justice to serve on these things and he would not do it and that was that when when he finished i said well you're a man that occupies uh one of the most important positions in this country and this country has been good to you and it's recognized you and i know it hasn't made any mistake i know that the merit to country fields you have is justified i remember somewhere seeing a picture of you as a army uniform when this country was under involved in war where you went out and offered your life to save your country and now uh your services are more necessary at this moment than they were then to save this country and i'm not going to take no for an answer and you're not going to tell me if the president of the united states says to you that you must do this for your country so that we can resolve once and for all without any for adventure of a doubt what happened here are you not going to say no are you and he said no i'm not that was it mr president dallas is still sort of a national trauma do you do you think that we as a people learned anything from that terrible experience well i'm not i'm not sure that i know how to know what the answer

[00:46:01 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=2761s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=2761s)

that i know how to know what the answer that question is i know we grieved a lot and i know we retraced our steps a lot i know we tried to say well if we had not done this what would have happened i think too that with the assassination of jim and this is present south of vietnam and the assassination of president kennedy and the other violent things that have taken place about that time or shortly after that that everyone engaged in a little introspection the nation itself did tried to improve its procedures tried to legislate to take some of the causes away like the gun legislation and things of that type tried to give the fbi some better facilities and secret service adequate appropriations and all those things i think we we learned that did you uh feel that you're well you must have felt that your recommendations on gun control legislation went far enough but there were a lot of critics who felt that they were lukewarm no i didn't know that i but everything didn't get to me because the only thing that i know nearly everyone thought that i went too far in my recommendations of uh for gun control legislation and i thought that the people that thought i went too far and they were the people that defeated the legislation were people that didn't understand really what i was asking and that they had been misled by propaganda and by leadership and by certain associates and uh things of that kind now this thought that we won't take guns away from people so that there's

[00:48:01 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=2881s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=2881s)

away from people so that there's some foreign power to take us over so the government can take us over i don't have the slightest bit of sympathy for i think that the person that has no evil intent only wants a gun to protect himself from the rattlesnakes of the hills or the the coyotes that are eating up his animals or that are preying upon the land i think he's uh no reason why shouldn't have it registered just like he has his car registered i can understand why the criminal wouldn't want registered but i can't understand why the rancher would or why the homeowner wouldn't mr president looking back on it would you have handled any of the details of that tragic day in dallas post assassination any differently there's nothing that i'm aware of that i did about going to texas or coming back from texas or about my relations with president kennedy's family or president kennedy's program that i would change i felt i was a trustee that had the responsibility in the constitutional requirement to carry on after he had been taken from us to i took his program and his family after he was fallen and i did everything that i would want a man to do for my program or my family if the same thing happened to me and after i finished writing completing and enacting and inaugurating and putting into execution the dreams that he had i started on my own and i had some too and i asked his brother and his family and his brother-in-law and his sister and

[00:50:02 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=3002s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYtW-ammprM&t=3002s)

his relations to help me and to stay in the government and to serve the country uh because i needed him even more than he did and every one of them that didn't in every moment of sorrow i've been by their side and every decision i made concerning him has been made with the feeling that this is what i believe he would

want done and i don't want anyone to ever say that i ever let him down for a moment thank you mr president

END